

Mr. Harper: He's Hotspur, not Hamlet



REX MURPHY - The Globe and Mail

We learn day by day that Stephen Harper will never play Hamlet.

Mr. Harper is a very decisive guy. A lot of people admire this. And there is much to admire about it. He was surely decisive this week, for example, when following the rejection of his candidate, Gwyn Morgan, to chair the federal appointments commission, he summarily refused to put forward another candidate and shut down the shop — so to speak.

Maybe that was decisive. Or maybe it was just sulkiness. Most likely it was both, with the fillip of being a good shot at the Liberals for “obstructing” a cleanup their own record had made necessary.

He was even more decisive when he took the House by surprise by asking for the debate to support a motion to extend the Afghan mission.

This was waste-no-time, full-speed-ahead Stephen in his more prime-executive manner. Mr. Harper has very pressing reasons for trying to secure early on whatever parliamentary support he can get. The Afghan mission is the single issue, depending on how our forces fare over the next while, that has the potential to obliterate all others when the next election is held. So the point of the early motion was very clear. It was to push (mainly) the Liberals, now in opposition, and at the start of the leadership campaign, to declare themselves on the mission they had originated.

It was a choice piece of political tactics.

After all, it was originally a “Liberal” mission. The reasons they advanced when they were in power — that the Afghan government needs and deserves our support, that the offensive dimension of our presence there (battling insurgents, fighting Taliban remnants) is an inevitable concomitant of our more peaceful intent — are the same reasons the Conservatives were offering for extending it.

So we can presume Mr. Harper thought an early, quick vote would do one of two things. The Liberals would either support the extension, in which case Afghanistan, which is now very much a Harper issue, would be off the table for the life of his government and, for that matter, in the next election, for the one party that is his only real threat. Or they would walk away from their own words and their own commitment, in which case they could be held up to voters as sublimely hypocritical and opportunistic on the most profound issue of our day.

But the aggressiveness of his approach, the short notice, and the tone of his words in and out of the Commons, very much take it or leave it, high dudgeon, and not a little of something that looked to me like surliness, did a lot to give those Liberals who in fact did vote against it plausible grounds for doing what they did.

What looked early on to be a deft piece of politics, another set piece of the decisive Mr. Harper at his best, moving with dispatch and confidence on the really big issues, became more of a snarl.

No Hamlet, but a lot of Hotspur.

Some Liberals, sensing the big push was at least as much politics as policy, at least as much about the next election as the mission itself, pushed back. Stéphane Dion railed against it as a “crass political move,” and Mr. Dion is one of the handful in Parliament who can say that kind of thing with conviction and credibility.

The resulting vote was so narrowly won, by a mere four votes, that it is extremely difficult to regard it in any but the most technical sense as a victory. The NDP and the Bloc Québécois are now, thanks to this week's tactic, free-range critics on Afghanistan, which they were not before. And if the Conservatives think splitting the Liberals on this vote is a victory, then it speaks to what they were trying to achieve on the vote: fracture of their main opposition, more than consolidation of parliamentary opinion on Afghanistan.

The Afghan mission is not health care or the gun registry or the appointments commission. It is, however mixed the age of terror has rendered the concept in our time, a question of our soldiers at war. By mixed, I mean that though the mission as a whole has components such as assisting democracy, revitalizing Afghanistan's civil structure — all benign and unwarlike components — it is still and primarily a war. As such, it exists in a moral terrain more profound than any “routine” issue that usually preoccupies the politicians and the House.

That should qualify it as the one issue that is outside the boundaries of manoeuvre and partisan one-upmanship. I am not certain whether this week's short-notice debate respected that profound distinction. Mr. Harper was decisive, though, I'll give him that. And maybe, yes, inside of the Commons, he had a win.

But did this week's vote change one mind outside the Commons, broaden the understanding of Canadians on Afghanistan, or invite those who prior to it were conflicted in their judgment to come over to its support? Probably not. A certain style of decisiveness can put people off. *Rex Murphy is a commentator with CBC-TV's The National and host of CBC Radio One's Cross-Country Checkup*